Can Democracy Be Saved?

Donatella della Porta
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Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements

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To Alessandro, Colin and Philippe,
with whom – without their knowing – this project started
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Acknowledgments

I began to reflect on this volume in 2003 when – together with Colin Crouch, Alessandro Pizzorno and Philippe Schmitter – I organized my first seminar at the European University Institute. The subject was ‘Transformations in Democracies’, and the debate was not only engaged, but deliberative as well.

Subsequently I went on to study changes in the conceptions and practices of democracy in the framework of the comparative research project ‘Democracy in Europe and the Mobilization of Society’ – ‘Demos’ (financed by the European Commission under the 6th framework). I am grateful for their many reflections to Massimiliano Andretta, Marco Giugni, Raffaele Marchetti, Lorenzo Mosca, Mario Pianta, Herbert Reiter, Dieter Rucht, Simon Teune and all my other colleagues, both junior and senior.

While the results of that research were published in various volumes, dedicated in particular to the global justice movement, this book was helped along by other additional stimuli. First and foremost was the preparation of a comparative research project on experiments in deliberative democracy (developed with the help of Bernard Gbikpi, Joan Fonts and Yves Sintomer), as well as that project’s first study, a piece of research carried out with Herbert Reiter, and supported by the Region of Tuscany.

The second (I believe), chronologically speaking, came to me from Alessandro Pizzorno who asked me to write a chapter on social movements and democracy for a project he was coordinating on the democratic state – specifying, however, that I was to concern myself not, as I
usually do, with the post-1968 era, but with the last three centuries (or more). For suggestions and inspiration for that chapter, discussed at the conference organized by the Feltrinelli Foundation in Cortona in 2010, I am grateful – in addition to Alessandro Pizzorno – to Roberto Biorcio, Pietro Costa, Colin Crouch, Klaus Eder, Leonardo Morlino, Bernardo Sordi and the other participants.

The third stimulus came from Mauro Calise who, as the then president of the Italian Society for Political Science, asked me to give the inaugural speech at the association’s annual conference in 2009. It was in preparing that speech that I entered the normative debate on democracy, albeit seeking to link it with the results of many pieces of empirical research – both mine and others’ – on transformations in democracies. It was on that occasion, finally, that Massimo Baldini asked me to write the Italian version of this book. My thanks also go to Mauro and Massimo for their trust and advice.

This book is, in any case, more than the final part of a journey, it is that journey’s continuation. Some of the reflections contained in this work have helped me prepare the project ‘Mobilizing for Democracy’, now financed by an Advanced Grant from the European Research Council (ERC), and its preliminary results are reported in various chapters. While the responsibility for what I have written remains mine, I’m grateful to the ERC and the European Commission for their support to my research.

Throughout these years, I have had the immense luck of enjoying the most stimulating environment, in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute. I have also carried out part of my research while I was a visiting scholar at the Wissenschaftszentrum für soziale Forschung in Berlin and at the Humboldt University. I thank my colleagues Dieter Rucht, Michael Zuern and Klaus Eder for their support there.

There is a striking paradox to note about the contemporary era: from Africa to Eastern Europe, Asia to Latin America, more and more nations and groups are championing the idea of democracy; but they are doing so at just that moment when the very efficacy of democracy as a national form of political organization appears open to question. As substantial areas of human activity are progressively organized on a regional or global level, the fate of democracy, and of the independent democratic nation-state in particular, is fraught with difficulties. (Held 1998, 11)

Many recent contributions on democracy start – like David Held’s above – by mentioning a paradox. On the one hand, the number of democratic countries in the world is growing – according to Freedom House, from thirty-nine democracies in 1974 to eighty-seven countries free and democratic, and sixty partially free, in 2011 (Freedom House 2012). On the other, there is a reduction in the satisfaction of citizens with the performances of ‘really existing democracies’ (Dahl 2000). Some scholars even suggested that the third wave of democratization risks developing into economic wars and armed conflicts (see, in particular, Tilly 2004). Certainly, research on quality of democracy by Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino (2005) pointed at the low quality of many democratic regimes. The question ‘Can democracy be saved?’ became central in the recent political debate faced with a most serious financial crisis, as well as apparent institutional incapacity to address it. Not only have these developments triggered harsh societal reactions and calls for politics to come back